CORE ELEMENT 4: Technology & Media Literacy

Before You Begin, Reflect:

1. *How has the use of technology changed since you were a young person?*
2. *Why is it valuable? What are the drawbacks?*
3. *In what ways is technology relevant to suicide prevention care?*

Young people are increasingly using virtual tools and engaging with digital communities when experiencing depression, anxiety and suicidality. Today, **research indicates that roughly 50% of adolescents spend 5 hours a day on social media while 12% spend over 10 hours** (Gillespie et al., 2024). Most young people (and adults) rely on the internet and social media for information about mental health distress and treatment options and/or coping strategies, as well as for avenues to connect to others with similar struggles and to share their experiences for validation, helpful advice and a sense of not feeling so alone in one's experience with suicidality. Increasingly, artificial intelligence (AI) platforms are resulting in youth engaging with AI chatbots around their mental health and coping strategies.

Adult providers must recognize that young people are actively and frequently engaged in leveraging digital spaces for their mental health needs. Familiarize themselves with the potential value and benefits as well as the limitations and dangers of these tools for suicide prevention. **Explore how each individual young person is using digital tools, such as texting or social media to support their mental health with openness and curiosity.** Avoid asking youth to fully refrain from using digital tools. Instead explore pros and cons of digital tools and communities for supporting youth mental health and wellness.

"It's easier to talk in a group chat than to a teacher."

"If I text my friend a '.' [period], that means check on me."

"It's easier to text about this stuff than say it out loud."

Technology, the internet and social media are constantly evolving and often difficult to keep up with for adults in general. Adult providers can dismiss the potential benefits of digital tools and communities when they are not familiar with them. Adults working with youth must prioritize becoming familiar with new social media and AI platforms that youth are engaging with. **A way for adult providers to become familiar with digital tools, communities and platforms is to explore their functionality together with young people.** When young people bring up digital tools and communities, it is critical to **keep an open-mind and ask open-ended non-judgmental questions to youth exploring** how the tool works, how youth feel that they are benefitting them, and potential dangers youth foresee and safeguards that are or could be in place to protect youth. The next page describes commonly used digital tools, communities, applications and platforms.

Common Digital Tools, Communities, Applications & Platforms

Type	Examples	Examples of Use	Potential Concerns
AI Chatbots	ChatGPT Copilot Claude	• Ask questions • Validation of feelings • Advice seeking	• Incorrect information • Could encourage suicidal action • Privacy & personal information risks
Social Media	TikTok Snapchat Instagram Youtube	• Connecting with peers • Information gathering • Entertainment	• Negative effect on self-esteem • Cyberbullying
Interactive Gaming	World of Warcraft	• Entertainment • Social connection through shared interest	• Inappropriate exposure to violent and sexual content • Cyberbullying
Online Communities & Chatrooms	Reddit Discord	• Validation of feelings • Information gathering • Community building	• Could encourage suicidal action • Cyberbullying
Streaming Platforms	Twitch	• Entertainment • Social connection through shared interest	• Exposure to inappropriate content • Privacy risks
Platforms for Community Connecting	Campfire Phoenix	• Joining groups to connect with people in community (e.g., PokemonGo groups)	• Broad access to personal location • Personal safety risks

Through the internet, smartphones and social media, **young people from all over the world can quickly and easily connect and bond over shared identities, life experiences and interests, and mental health distress and suicidality.** Young people now can find community and belonging in digital spaces that would not have been possible in the past. Young people are actively searching for connection with others in digital spaces based on personal experiences and struggles, e.g., chronic illnesses, disabilities, and niche interests. Digital spaces are an example of third spaces detailed in Core Element 2 (Third Spaces & Alternative Service Opportunities).

"I found other people like me in a Discord [chatroom] space. That helped."

"Checking in doesn't have to be deep. Just knowing someone notices helps."

"Sometimes I just need to scroll and feel numb for a while."

Young people increasingly use AI tools to seek nonjudgmental support with suicidal thoughts or feelings. **Providers must explore mental health benefits and drawbacks among youth using artificial intelligence (AI) for mental health support.** AI chatbots are NOT mental health professionals. Publicly available and free AI chatbots (e.g., Gemini, ChatGPT, Claude) are not trained in mental health and suicide prevention evidence-based practices. **AI chatbots are not held to the same ethical standards of mental health professionals.** AI chatbots are not regulated, monitored or designed to provide mental health support – and although are found to be helpful to some youth, they also pose real risk to youth mental health and safety.

"If you're looking for advice there, I would say definitely steer away from that [AI use], because there's just a lot of unknowns there. It doesn't always give you the same advice. It doesn't always give you great advice."

"The AI will be telling them to do dark things, or like agreeing with them in that state of mind."

"However, I have noticed that it [AI tools] can keep you ruminating on it. It can be really great but it can also get you trapped in a little bit of a cycle."

Digitally-delivered mental health treatment (referred to as "telehealth") has expanded access to those who live in rural areas, have limited access to transportation, and/or have a disability. Young people have increasing access to online counseling (e.g., Talkspace, BetterHelp) and peer support (e.g., peers.net). **Mental health care access outside of one's physical location via digital platforms increases connections to providers who share identities (e.g., racial, ethnic, cultural, sexual, gender), life experiences (e.g., divorced parents, poverty, incarceration, homelessness), interests and values.** Research shows evidence-based mental health care can be delivered effectively online with similar positive impacts to in-person care.

When discussing telehealth with youth, explore potential safety concerns, especially around suicide prevention practices in the event of a crisis. Co-develop safety plans that leverage both the physical and virtual world that includes who to connect with in-person and virtually when in crisis. **Often online mental health providers cannot provide crisis support, and instead provide a general crisis line for their clients to access crisis supports.** If you are an adult provider supporting youth experiencing suicide, review your agency's protocol for suicidality with youth (and their family members) to ensure youth have access to timely, effective crisis care.

Lead with curiosity when exploring young people's use of digital spaces for navigating suicidal thoughts and feelings. **Explore what digital spaces feel important/relevant to young people, why they may or may not be helpful, and how they engage with these spaces with a nonjudgmental perspective.** It is unrealistic to assume that young people are going to stop utilizing digital tools and spaces for navigating their mental health and wellness. Use harm reduction strategies instead of a digital "abstinence" based approach to explore youth's **intentions and motivations for using digital spaces and accessing digital communities.** For additional guidance within these conversations, see page 34 **Considerations for Digital Awareness**. Explore why, when, and how young people are using digital tools, especially AI chatbots, for navigating suicidal thoughts and feelings. Develop clear safety plans that include in-person supports, and virtual tools and communities when appropriate and relevant, to provide effective suicide prevention care.

> *"...just acknowledging that it is a part of our everyday life. I think that's really important with every resource, is that you acknowledge it's not the best, but having that conversation gets in front of it."*

Culturally Responsive & Trauma-Informed Reminder:

Youth engagement with digital tools and spaces for navigating mental health and wellness is normal and developmentally appropriate. Adult providers should not police or restrict digital tool/community use but be open to exploring the benefits and risks to youth who are experiencing suicidal thoughts and feelings. Remain curious about the way youth utilize digital tools and spaces. **Use of digital tools, including social media for navigating suicidal ideation may be a method of survival, particularly for disabled, queer, or culturally marginalized youth.**

Considerations for Digital Awareness

Technology will always be part of young people's lives and will only continue evolving rapidly. Below are additional suggestions to empower providers and young people in engaging in conversations around technology use, media literacy, and digital awareness.

Encourage Limited Screen Time

Talk about ways to limit screen time through built-in tools like timers or doing other hobbies that don't involve a screen. It's unrealistic to expect young people to completely eliminate screen time, but diversify the way young people consume information and allocate their attention.

Get to Know the Apps

With so many options and more getting developed every day, have a candid conversation with young people about which apps they prioritize as part of their digital diet, and don't assume everyone uses the same ones. Understand the purpose of these apps in particular and how the young person engages with them without judgement.

Remember Technology is Not Going Anywhere

Young people will use technology, including social media and AI tools. The goal is not to completely discourage the use of tech tools, but foster a culture of open conversation and harm reduction, so that young people understand potential dangers of using technology for suicide prevention and engage with it thoughtfully.

Remember the Permanency and Inaccuracy of the Internet

It's important to educate young people about their digital footprint and how what they post online and send electronically can have lasting impacts. Conversely, information found online or through AI tools may not be reliable or true, so encourage young people to bring in what they learn from online tools into sessions to discuss together.

An Example to Practice

A young person named Lola comes into the office for a regular, routine visit. Lola discloses experiencing suicidal thoughts in the past few weeks and the development of a plan without any further intent or attempts. The doctor asks more questions about how Lola navigates being in crisis and Lola explains how they use AI tools when they need someone to talk to, and especially when other support people are not around. They describe feeling validated, cared for and more stable after engaging with AI.

Discussion Questions:

- What other questions should the doctor ask Lola about their use of AI? How could they explore the need that AI fulfills from a nonjudgemental perspective?
- What psychoeducation feels important to discuss regarding the potential dangers and benefits of AI?
- Which harm reduction tactics may be the most feasible at this point for Lola? How could they collectively work to implement them?